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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000349

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO
DEPT FOR NEA/ELA,AND PRM/FO
DEPT PASS TO EU MEMBER STATES

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [SMIG](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: PRM A/S WITTEN REVIEWS IRAQI REFUGEE
SITUATION IN LEBANON

REF: STATE 12997

Classified By:
Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Acting Foreign Minister Tarek Mitri conveyed his concerns to visiting Acting A/S for Population, Refugees and Migration Samuel Witten about the complex situation of Iraqi refugees residing in Lebanon. He admitted that some in the Lebanese public are suffering from "paranoia," and he is concerned that this public perception is leading to a general indifference to the plight of Iraqis. He has made a personal effort to eliminate the use of indefinite detention of Iraqis refugees, who lack legal proof of residency, and hoped his government's decision to allow Iraqis to apply for a three-month residency permit will improve protection for this population.

¶2. (C) International Organizations (IOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Lebanon gave mixed reviews of GOL treatment of Iraqi refugees. While the GOL has improved in some areas, i.e. allowing Iraqis to apply for temporary residency, it remains to be seen whether the GOL will maintain this type of leniency if another security situation, like Nahr al-Barid, arises. A A/S Witten also reviewed space limitations at Post for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to conduct refugee interviews of Iraqis referred to the U.S. resettlement program, and emphasized that DHS should be given the opportunity to discuss the available options with Embassy officials during its circuit ride to Beirut in March.

End summary.

¶3. (C) Acting Assistant Secretary Samuel Witten, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and PRM Program Officer Liana Brooks-Rubin, during the second half of their visit to Beirut on February 28, met with Acting Foreign Minister Tarek Mitri to discuss the situation of Iraqi refugees in Lebanon and review procedures for the U.S. resettlement program for Iraqi refugees in Lebanon. (See septel for a readout of the first half of A A/S Witten's visit dealing with Nahr al-Barid Palestinian refugee issues.)
¶4. (C) During a dinner hosted by the Charge on February 28, A A/S Witten also met with a number of IOs and NGOs including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Director Stephane Jaquemet, International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) Program Director Maha Ganni, International

Organization for Migration (IOM) Program Development Officer
Torsten Haschenz, Catholic Relief Services Country
Representative Melinda Burrell, International Committee for
the Red Cross (ICRC) Head of Delegation Jordi Raich,
International Medical Corp (IMC) Country Director Colin Lee,
and Caritas Director Najla Chahda.

FM MITRI IS PERSONALLY CONCERNED ABOUT
PLIGHT OF IRAQIS REFUGEES

15. (C) In a February 28 meeting with A A/S Witten, Charge,
PRM Program Officer Liana Brooks-Rubin, and Poloffs, Acting
FM Tarek Mitri conveyed his concerns about the difficulties
faced by an estimated 50,000 Iraqi refugees residing in
Lebanon, especially those in the country illegally. Mitri
admitted that some in the Lebanese public are suffering from
"paranoia" about the Iraqi refugee community in Lebanon,
mostly due to last summer's conflict between the Lebanese
Army and Fatah al-Islam (FAI) in Nahr al-Barid Palestinian
camp. According to Mitri, a large segment of the Lebanese
population views Iraqis as "terrorists in waiting." Mitri
said he is concerned that this perception by the Lebanese
public has led to a general indifference about the plight of
Iraqi refugees in Lebanon.

16. (C) AA/S Witten said that the U.S. understands the
difficult task that governments in the region have in
handling Iraqi refugees and noted especially the burden faced
by Lebanon given its tense political climate. Witten
emphasized that in fiscal year 2007, the USG contributed \$171
million to IOs and NGOs to assist displaced Iraqis in Syria,
Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. Witten said the U.S. has pledged

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to resettle 12,000 Iraqis in the U.S. by the end of fiscal
year 2008. Witten also relayed that the U.S. expects UNHCR
to refer to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) 1,900
Iraqis from Lebanon. Mitri thanked AA/S Witten for USG
efforts to resettle Iraqi refugees, but mused about the
overall number for U.S. resettlement given the total Iraqi
refugee population, saying "it is not much, is it?" A A/S
Witten explained that UNHCR's primary focus is to assist
refugees in their current host countries until the situation
in Iraq allows for their safe and voluntary return. Third
country resettlement, while the only viable durable solution
for a fraction of the Iraqi refugee population, should not be
viewed as the primary solution for this population.

COMPLEX SITUATION FOR
IRAQI REFUGEES

17. (C) Mitri said the Iraqi refugee situation in Lebanon is
complex. He explained that about 75 percent of the Iraqi
refugees either entered Lebanon illegally or are holders of
expired non-immigrant visas. Lebanon is neither a signatory
to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention nor the 1967 Protocol
Relating to the Status of Refugees. The country has no
domestic refugee law. Therefore, Iraqis who enter Lebanon
illegally for the purpose of seeking asylum are treated as
illegal immigrants and subject to arrest, imprisonment, and
forced deportation back to Iraq. Mitri said he became
"personally involved" in improving protection for this
population after he learned about the treatment of some Iraqi
refugees in recent months. Mitri stated that an estimated 80
Iraqis currently are in detention. (Note: As noted below,
the IO and NGO community puts the estimated figure of
detained Iraqis at 400. Mitri noted that he had been out of
the country for two weeks and acknowledged that his estimate
might not accurately reflect the current GOL estimate. End
Note.)

18. (C) Mitri said the GOL has agreed, in principle, with
UNHCR to allow Iraqi refugees to apply to the GOL for a
three-month permit, which provides legal status to stay in

Lebanon and allows them time to apply for a long-term work permit. Mitri said he hopes that this three-month permit, issued by the Surete Generale, the government agency responsible for immigration issues, will go a long way toward improving protection for Iraqis. He also hoped it would alleviate Iraqi fears of detention or forced return to Iraq and lead more Iraqis to register with UNHCR.

¶9. A A/S Witten asked Mitri if the Government of Lebanon would have any objection to Iraqi refugees in Lebanon pursuing direct access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, without having been referred to the United States by UNHCR. He noted that recent U.S. legislation contemplates that Iraqis who have had certain defined affiliation with the United States now could pursue direct access without a UNHCR referral, and that Jordan and Egypt permitted such direct access. Mitri said he saw no reason that Lebanon would have any difficulties with such direct access.

A/S WITTEN COMMENDS IOs and NGOS
FOR THEIR WORK IN LEBANON

¶10. (U) During a dinner, hosted by the Charge and attended by Brooks-Rubin and Poloffs, with a number of IOs and NGOs in Lebanon, A A/S Witten commended the humanitarian organizations for their programs and activities benefiting Iraqi refugees in Lebanon and said that this support is essential for ensuring that this vulnerable population receives adequate protection and assistance.

HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS SEE GRADUAL GOL
IMPROVEMENT IN THE TREATMENT OF IRAQI REFUGEES....

¶11. (U) UNHCR Director Stephane Jaquemet confirmed that the GOL would soon begin to release Iraqi refugees from detention and allow them to apply for a three-month residence permit. Jaquemet said that the first thirteen Iraqis would be released on March 3. (Note: On March 3, UNHCR confirmed to Poloff that thirteen Iraqis were indeed released from detention. End Note.) Jaquemet is confident that the Surete Generale will continue with the new policy for the

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foreseeable future, but he did emphasize that the international community, including foreign embassies and IOs, must maintain pressure on the GOL to ensure that it does not reverse policy.

...BUT FM MITRI'S NUMBER OF IRAQI
REFUGEES DETAINED "IS TOO LOW"

¶12. (SBU) According to Jaquemet and IOM's Program Officer Torsten Haschenz, the current number of Iraqi refugees detained on the charge of illegal entry is about 400. When told that FM Mitri had given a smaller number of 80, both Jaquemet and Haschenz expressed their opinion that Mitri's number was too low. Jaquemet added that Mitri's number might reflect Iraqis charged only for the lack of proper identification. He said many Iraqis in detention are charged not only on non-identification charges, but may have other "illegal immigration charges." However, Jaquemet admitted that even UNHCR does not have an exact number of Iraqis in detention. He said that UNHCR will work with the GOL to determine the correct number.

COORDINATION CRITICAL TO ENSURE SMOOTH PROCESSING
OF IRAQI REFUGEE REFERRALS TO THE USRAP

¶13. (C) ICMC Program Director Maha Ganni, whose organization in Lebanon is the Oversees Processing Entity (OPE) responsible for conducting case processing for Iraqis and other refugees referred by UNHCR for U.S. resettlement consideration

explained that good coordination between PRM, DHS, ICMC, and UNHCR is essential to avoid any "bureaucratic or procedural" delays. She said while that should be obvious to all involved, in practice, coordination often is difficult due to the sheer volume of procedural details involved in processing referrals for resettlement.

LIMITATIONS FOR CONDUCTING REFERRAL
INTERVIEWS AT POST

¶14. Before the Charge's dinner, A A/S Witten toured the Embassy compound accompanied by ICMC,s Ganni, Consular Chief Kirk Smith, and Management Chief Michelle Esperdy to evaluate space availability for DHS refugee adjudication interviews. The Consular chief explained that there are significant space constraints on the compound to handle the large number of potential UNHCR referrals (up to 1,900) that ICMC and DHS adjudicators would have to interview. Taking these space constraints into consideration, Embassy officers and ICMC agreed that the best place would be the Consular building, although they left open the possibility of exploring other locations on Embassy compound in consultation with the RSO. This facility provides a secured area and would not require the personnel-intensive shuttling of Iraqis to different parts of the compound. The downside is the facility could be used only in the late afternoon after visa processing is completed for the day. A A/S Witten said that he understood the limitations involved and that DHS would be in a better position to judge what would work best for its adjudicators under the prevailing circumstances.

¶15. (C) PRM A A/S Witten cleared on cable.
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